Chapter 20
Second Life, Second Morality?

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ABSTRACT
This study is an examination of in-world morality of frequent residents of Second Life. Given the lack of systematic research on morality in non-gaming virtual worlds, the authors conducted an explorative small-scale, in-depth qualitative study with regular Second Life-residents. Drawing on cyber-anthropology, cyber-sociology, and game studies, they explore to what extent ideas and pictures of in-world moral behaviour differ from moral categories and definitions used in real life situations. Research findings show, firstly, that communication and sanction mechanisms (e.g. gossip), known from real life, are important means to create social control and group cohesion in Second Life. Secondly, the technologically mediated context intensifies and provides new tools for social control (e.g. alternative avatar). Thirdly, residents also make use of “out-world” systems to restrict or punish immoral behaviour (e.g. blogs, discussion forums, Web search engines). In general, findings indicate that morality in Second Life is not completely different from morality shown in real life. On the other hand, they also point at distinctiveness in a mediated environment because of specific technological tools.

INTRODUCTION
Although today millions of people are spending a considerable amount of time in three-dimensional non-gaming virtual worlds, little systematic research has been done regarding the question of morality and its distinctive nature in these particular worlds. This lack is in sharp contrast to the numerous media debates on Second Life. Much ink has flowed in popular media discourses about the alleged absence of morality in this social virtual world. In those ‘panic waves’ the freedom that users have to experiment without restraints is often linked with the upsurge of immoral or amoral behaviour (e.g. Kuipers, 2006). Likewise game studies have shown much more
interest in moral issues (e.g. sex, violence, aggression, cheating) in digital games like World of Warcraft or first person shooter games as Call of Duty: Modern Warfare or America’s Army (see amongst many others Consalvo, 2005; Anderson, 2004; Anderson, & Bushman, 2002; Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, 2007; Anderson, Sakaoto, Gentile, et al., 2008; Bushman, & Anderson, 2002; Ferguson, 2009; Mathiak, & Weber, 2006; Weber, Ritterfeld, & Mathiak, 2006; Longman, O’Connor, & Obst, 2009).

Taking these observations as our setting, we aim to provide a more evidence-based understanding of how people make sense of virtual morality. Our research focuses on the popular and widely known social virtual world Second Life (SL). SL was created in 2003 by Linden Lab and is defined as “an immersive, user-created online world” (Au, 2008, p. x). Linden Lab does not impose a game-oriented goal on its residents; they are free to choose how to spend their time in-world. Exactly this freedom to act and to experiment in a world that is believed to be a second, different or so-called “otherworld” (Dibbell, 1993) is the starting point of our investigation. We explore how people who often engage in SL think about morally un/acceptable values and behaviour in SL and how they relate morality in SL to morality in ‘real life’: as analogue and correlated or discontinuous and disconnected. Social life has produced different systems to restrict and punish immoral behaviour in ‘real life’: as analogue and correlated or disconnected and disconnected. Social life has produced different systems to restrict and punish immoral behaviour in ‘real life’. One can ask oneself if these systems also stand in virtual worlds. Or to phrase the question more radically: does it really matter that immoral behaviour is limited or punished in virtual worlds, as these worlds are only ‘virtual’ and thus not rooted in actuality?

The specific focus in this chapter is on the dynamics and mechanisms of social control: how they are rooted in offline social conventions people bring along when they dwell in SL, but also how they are shaped and activated through the technological design and tools of SL. In what follows, we start with the theoretical background of our study. We elaborate on a description of morality, on the idea of virtual space as a moral space and we discuss the distinctiveness of SL in relation to the virtual environments of gaming. Next, we present our methodology and research findings. We conducted a small-scale, in-depth qualitative study in order to examine the in-world morality of frequent residents. We interviewed devoted SL-residents and discussed their moral experiences in SL, in order to gain an understanding of the moral nature of social interactions in SL. In particular, the in-world prevention, exclusion, and punishment of immoral behaviour are discussed here.

MORALITY, ETHICS, AND SOCIALITY

Although morality and ethics are often interpreted and treated as synonyms, clear distinctions can be drawn between both concepts. In a stricter sense, ethics deal with the systematic and critical reflection on morals and morality, and in doing so they also refer to a specific field of philosophical study. Morals and morality, on the other hand, refer respectively to the habits and norms that are given within a specific cultural context, and to the individual reflection of those norms into personal codes of conduct. Morality comes about whenever a subject is conscious of his or her conduct, i.e. when personal behaviour is reflected in an awareness that is not determined by a supra-personal (external) normative source (e.g. law). Moral persons reflect on and evaluate their behaviour, principles, judgments, norms, and values on an individual, personal level (for further discussion, see a.o. Ross, 1967; Atkinson, 1969; Frankena, 1973; Williams, 1976; Mackie, 1990; Blackburn, 2001). Since every human being develops a kind of morality, it becomes an object of scientific research, i.e. in the academic discipline of ethics or moral philosophy.

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